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THE CRISIS OF THE REAGAN PRESIDENCY

SELECTING A CIA DIRECTOR

Webster Restored FBI's Image

Expansion of Agency Activities Provided a Few Awkward Moments

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William H. Webster, in his nine years as director of the FBI, used his reputation for personal integrity to restore public confidence in a tarnished agency, but also presided over two embarrassing spy cases.

Under the former U.S. appellate court judge, the Federal Bureau of Investigation moved away from its concentration on bank robbery and stolen car rings—the emphasis during the reign of J. Edgar Hoover—and into such sensitive areas as political corruption, drug enforcement and organized crime.

Webster, who was nominated yesterday as the new director of central intelligence, has also increased the bureau's activity in the areas of counterintelligence and antiterrorism. That represents his only experience in foreign affairs as he takes on his new post. "They're [the Central Intelligence Agency] intelligence. We're counterintelligence. It's a whole different ball game," one FBI agent said.

Webster worked closely with former CIA director William J. Casey, and the bureau's counterintelligence budget has soared along with the CIA's because of the Reagan administration's emphasis on rebuilding its intelligence apparatus.

At the same time, the counterintelligence side of the FBI provided Webster with some of his most embarrassing moments. In 1984, Richard Miller became the first FBI agent ever arrested for espionage. He was later convicted.

In 1985, Edward Lee Howard, a former CIA officer who was accused of providing secrets to the Soviets, eluded an FBI surveillance team at his house in New Mexico and made his way to the Soviet Union where he was given asylum.

The congressional intelligence committees, with which Webster will now work even more closely, have been highly critical of the CIA and FBI handling of the Howard case.

Webster's move to the CIA also may cause awkward moments because his agents have been aiding independent counsel Lawrence E. Walsh in the criminal investigation of the Iran arms sales-contra aid affair, which focuses in part on the CIA's role. In addition, Walsh is looking into a decision by Webster, at the request of the Justice Department, to halt temporarily an investigation of a Florida charter airline's connection to a private resupply operation for the contras fighting the government of Nicaragua.

Webster, a lifelong Republican who will turn 63 on Friday, was appointed FBI director by President Jimmy Carter in 1978. He had had a long legal career in St. Louis that included private practice, a stint as U.S. attorney, and service first as a U.S. District Court judge and later on the 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

One reason Webster was chosen nine years ago to head the FBI was his reputation for absolute honesty. The FBI had been rocked by a series of scandals involving domestic surveillence of American citizens and petty corruption by longtime Director Hoover and his closest aides.

One of Webster's first acts in office was to order the bust of Hoover removed from the director's office and placed in the tourist section of the FBI building so he would not have to view it every day.

Inside the FBI, Webster is known as a difficult, sometimes intolerant leader who prefers to be known as "Judge" and who does not countenance mistakes by subordinates. But even those who have felt his sting appreciate the aura of integrity he has brought back to the FBI and his practice of publicly defending the agency's use of aggressive and sometimes controversial law enforcement methods.

For example, in 1979, several members of Congress were captured on videotape in the FBI's "Abscam" sting, leading to cries of entrapment from civil libertarians. But Webster defended his agents in hours of interrogations on Capitol Hill. The defendants were found guilty and their convictions upheld.

When the Reagan administration arrived in 1981 with a plan to loosen restrictions on intelligence agencies, Webster was a moderating influence. In an administration that wanted to expand the use of polygraphs, Webster openly expressed his uneasiness over the reliability and intrusiveness of that technique.

Webster is a Christian Scientist who neither drinks nor smokes. He is a fanatical tennis player and a regular on the Washington social circuit.

In 1984, Webster's wife, Drusilla, died and there were rumors that he would resign to return to his Missouri farm. But he later told friends that he had become attached to Washington and was afraid he would be lonely out of the mainstream.